



Your Guide to Understanding School Meals



An Overview of School Meals

Many schools in Montana participate in the USDA's (United States Department of Agriculture) School Nutrition Programs. These programs include School Lunch, School Breakfast, Afterschool Snack, and the Special Milk programs. If your school participates in one of these programs, there are certain requirements that the food they serve to children must meet. The most important thing to understand about meals served by schools participating in School Nutrition Programs is they are designed to meet certain goals set out by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Over the course of a week, all school meals must meet...

➤ **Recommended Daily Allowances (RDA's)**

- 1/3 RDA for lunch
- 1/4 RDA for breakfast
- Age appropriate

➤ **Calorie Goals**

- Age appropriate

➤ **Dietary Guidelines for Americans**

These goals are the basis for the design of the menu plans. When a school participates in a School Nutrition Program, they are required by the USDA to meet these goals using certain menu plans. Schools can choose to use a food-based plan (Traditional or Enhanced) or a nutrient-standard plan (NSMP). Schools using food-based plans are required to include a certain number of servings from all the food groups daily. Schools using nutrient-based plans are required to provide foods that meet the RDAs over the course of the week. A more specific discussion of each of these plans is on the next page.

Nutrients most closely monitored are:

- ✓ *Calories*
- ✓ *Protein*
- ✓ *Calcium*
- ✓ *Iron*
- ✓ *Vitamins A & C*
- ✓ *Total fat and saturated fat*

It is important to realize that children have energy and nutrient requirements that are higher than adults. School meals are designed to meet these age-specific needs, which means they are higher in calories and fat than an average adult-appropriate meal. It is also important to notice that school meals are designed to meet nutrition requirements over time. For example, one meal might consist of high fat foods, but it will be balanced out over the course of the week by lower fat meals.

Types of Meal Plans:

- **Traditional Food-Based Menu Planning:** This is the oldest menu planning system. It is based on the four food groups: milk, meat/meat alternate, bread/grains, and fruits/vegetables. This system requires specific food group components in specific amounts for specific age groups every day.

Using the Traditional plan, a reimbursable lunch for grades 4-12 must consist of...

- ✓ 2 ounces of lean meat or other protein food
- ✓ 1 slice of bread or ½ cup grains (8 servings per week)
- ✓ ¾ cup of vegetable/fruit (two different kinds)
- ✓ 8 fluid ounces of milk.

- **Enhanced Food-Based Menu Planning:** Similar to the Traditional system, but this system is modeled after the Food Guide Pyramid, and thus requires more servings of Fruits/Vegetables and Grains/Breads.

Specifically, lunches for grades 6-12 must provide...

- ✓ 2 ounces of lean meat
- ✓ At least 15 servings of grains over the week
- ✓ At least ¾ cup of fruits/vegetables every day (two different kinds)
- ✓ 8 fluid ounces of milk

- **Nutrient Standard Menu Planning (NSMP):** This meal plan is based on nutrients, not food groups. Schools that use this meal plan are required to conduct a computer analysis of their menus to ensure that they meet at least 1/3 of the RDA in specific nutrients (listed above) for lunch and ¼ of the RDA for breakfast.

For lunch, schools using NSMP must include...

- ✓ Entrée
- ✓ Side dish.
- ✓ 8 fluid ounces of milk served as a beverage

Children must take the entree and at least one other item for the meal to be reimbursable.

It is important to remember that nutrients are averaged for a whole week, so some meals may be higher or lower in certain nutrients as long as they balance out over the course of a week.

- **Assisted NSMP:** Exactly like NSMP except *menu planning and analysis is conducted by an agency other than the school food service*. This option is useful for schools that do not have access to the equipment they would need to conduct a menu analysis.

The Link between Child Health and the School Nutrition Programs

School Nutrition Programs – initiated in 1946 with the National School Lunch Program

Recent studies show that only 1 percent of all children have eating patterns consistent with dietary recommendations. Forty-five percent of America's elementary school children eat less than one serving of fruit and 20 percent eat less than one serving of vegetables on any given day and more than one-half do not meet the recommended number of servings of grains. Only 18 percent of girls ages 9 to 19 meet their calcium requirement, yet milk consumption continues to decline, while the consumption of soft drinks, fruit drinks and fruit-ades increases. Most U.S. children (about two-thirds) eat more fat than is recommended. In addition, a National Center for Health Statistics study showed that 4.7 million U.S. youths ages 6-17 are overweight. These factors contribute to the incidence of heart disease, stroke, diabetes and other diet-related diseases. They have implications for education, for future health care costs, and for quality of life.

Studies have shown that nutrition is a critical component in promoting adolescent health. The Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Child Nutrition Programs can be effective vehicles for addressing these problems. The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) are available to all schools. Nutritious snacks are now available through the NSLP for students in school-sponsored after school programs, and the Summer Food Service Program is available to provide nutritious meals when school is not session. In addition to providing schools with reimbursement for meals served; School Nutrition Programs monitors the types of lunches, breakfasts and snacks served in participating schools, and provides technical assistance to schools in providing optimal nutrition to students. School Nutrition Programs administers a variety of programs that have a significant impact on the health and well-being of students in Montana.

National School Lunch Program (NSLP) - 1946

School lunches must meet the applicable recommendations of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which are designed to promote optimal health and decrease nutrition related diseases in the American population. Schools that participate in the Lunch Program must provide a menu that (when averaged over the course of a week) provides no more than 30 percent of an individual's calories from fat, and less than 10 percent from saturated fat. Standards are also established for school lunches to provide one-third of the Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDA) of protein, Vitamin A, Vitamin C, iron, calcium, and calories. Due to consistent promotion efforts by School Nutrition Programs, the Lunch Program continues to grow in Montana despite declining enrollment in schools.

School Breakfast Program (SBP) - 1975

The School Breakfast Program has the same requirements for nutrients as the Lunch Program, with the exception that breakfasts must meet a quarter ($1/4$) of the RDA for nutrients of concern, instead of the one-third ($1/3$) required for lunches. Research has clearly shown the relationship between student health, well-being, and ability to perform in school and their consumption of breakfast. One of the primary objectives of Montana School Nutrition Programs is to promote student health by making school breakfast available to as many students as possible. The Breakfast Program is one of Montana's fastest growing School Nutrition Programs.

Team Nutrition Program - 1995

Team Nutrition is an integrated, behavior-based, comprehensive plan for promoting the nutritional health of the Nation's school children. Through Team Nutrition, School Nutrition Programs is able to provide schools with critical training and assistance to help school food service staff prepare healthful meals; and provide nutrition education to help children understand the link between diet and health. Team Nutrition's goal is to improve children's lifelong eating and physical activity habits by using the principles of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the Food Guide Pyramid. Team Nutrition promotes comprehensive, behavior-based nutrition education to enable children to make healthy eating and physical activity choices.

Social cognitive theory is the foundation of efforts to help children understand how eating and physical activity affect the way they grow, learn, play, and feel today as well as the relationship of their choices to lifelong health. Efforts are designed to increase their understanding that healthy eating and physical activity are fun and that skills developed today will assist them in enjoying healthy eating and physical activity in later years.

Summer Food Service Program - 1968

The Summer Food Service Program provides nutritious meals at no charge to children while school is not in session. This program was established to ensure that children in low-income areas could continue to receive nutritious meals in between school sessions, and is essential to the health of children in Montana. To try and better meet the needs of the children in Montana, School Nutrition Programs actively recruits sponsors throughout the school year. School Nutrition Programs also works to make the program more appealing to children. For example, the Pro Rodeo Cowboy Association cowboys visited several sites in 2004. School Nutrition Programs has also developed partnerships with service-oriented professions, such as police and fire departments. Due to these efforts, the Summer Food Service Program has seen significant growth in Montana over the last five years.

Food Distribution Program - 1993

Schools that participate in the Lunch Program are eligible to receive commodity (donated) foods through the Food Distribution Program. The commodity foods available through this program promote nutrition integrity in school meals, by offering foods that fit into an overall healthful menu plan. Commodity foods offered in Montana include lean meats (examples include lean beef patties, lower-fat ground beef, and 95% fat free turkey ham), lower sugar offerings (canned fruit in light syrup or water), and lower fat offerings (low-fat cheeses). The United States Department of Agriculture is continuously updating the offerings in the Food Distribution Program to make them more healthful. New offerings within the last few years include salsa, reduced calorie salad dressing, cheese blends made from skim milk, frozen peach cups, chicken fajita strips, and turkey taco filling.

Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program – 2002

The health benefits of fruits and vegetables are well-documented, but many schools in Montana cannot serve as much of these items as they would like due to the prohibitive cost (especially for fresh fruits and vegetables). The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program is a commodity program where schools can use a portion of their entitlement dollars (allotted through the Food Distribution Program) to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables. Schools and students in Montana have shown strong support for this program, and it's growth is limited only by the maximum dollar amount (set by the USDA) that Montana is allowed to use from it's overall commodity food entitlement.

Afterschool Snack Program - 2001

Schools that participate in the Lunch Program are eligible to participate in the Afterschool Snack Program. This program fosters health and well-being by offering nutritious snacks in conjunction with supervised enrichment activities. Snacks served through the Afterschool Snack Program must meet nutrition guidelines that follow the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Afterschool snack programs also help fill the time between the end of school and dinner, when children are often unsupervised, and can get into trouble.

Recess Before Lunch - 2002

Recess Before Lunch is a policy that is relatively new to Montana, but is shown to have a significant positive impact on student health and ability to perform in school. Schools in Montana were among the first in the nation to pilot this program, and have met with a high level of success. This policy swaps the traditional order of lunch followed by recess. Studies have shown that students play, eat, and study better if recess precedes lunch. The Montana Team Nutrition Program has been instrumental in helping schools implement this policy around Montana, and continues to work with schools interested in implementing this policy.

School Meals Initiative Reviews – 1995

Since 1995, schools participating in the School Nutrition Programs (National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, and Afterschool Snack Program) have been required to undergo a School Meals Initiative (SMI) review at least once every five years. This review entails a nutrient analysis of the schools menus and is based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Schools that do not meet the requirements of the School Nutrition Programs must implement corrective action to help meals meet the guidelines. These reviews are essential to make schools accountable for meeting the requirements set out by the United States Department of Agriculture for participating in the School Nutrition Programs, the benefits of which are listed above.

Where can I find more information?

- Call School Nutrition Programs at the Office of Public Instruction at (406) 444-2501, or look online at www.opi.mt.gov/schoolfood/index.html.
- For more information on USDA's Child Nutrition Programs, go to www.fns.usda.gov.
- Check out the resources at Team Nutrition's web site: www.fns.usda.gov/tn.

